

Chapter 67

Tibs looked at them, Jackal, Carina, and Kroseph, and wished he could wash away the worry off their face. He wanted to offer them comfort, but how could he, when he was the cause? He was who they worried about. It was why they were in Kroseph's room again, and why he was here this time. The first time he'd been told everything about what Tibs had done since getting his first audience with Water.

Kroseph had been surprisingly accepting of what Tibs had been told was impossible even after he'd done it. Maybe being surrounded by people who could wield essence and with a dungeon that changed to continuously challenge the Runners made the impossible less so for him.

He wished that telling them not to worry, that he was fine, would be enough. Instead, he pointed out he wasn't that important in the end. "We need to be out there, helping the town."

"That doesn't sound so different from the Tibs I know," Kroseph said.

"Tibs," Jackal said. "How about we go out there, find my father, and kill him so he can't hurt the town anymore?"

Tibs couldn't believe what he heard. "No. Violence isn't going to solve this. I need to find him and soothe the pain that's causing him to act out like this. To explain there's a better way." He wanted to head out immediately. The sooner he found Sebastian, the quicker this could stop and everyone would be better. But he'd agreed to stay with his friend until they were satisfied he was fine.

And, judging by their expression, they weren't there yet.

"Okay," Kroseph said. "That's too nice even for Tibs. And you said every element makes him act differently?"

Carina nodded. "I only saw Water and Fire. Jackal saw him using Earth. With Water, he wants to help everyone. With Fire, he wanted to burn the entire town, like there was only rage inside him. Is that what fire is?"

"No," Jackal said. "I've asked the Runners here who have fire as their element. They don't describe Fire as being angry. Eager is how one of them described it. Running hot is how another one did. Tibs's understandable anger at what those men were doing became an uncontrollable rage."

"So his anger triggered the fire?" Kroseph asked.

"I didn't call on Fire because I was angry. All I had was a knife, and I wanted them to be afraid so they'd stop." He paused. "I shouldn't have wanted that. Fear doesn't help. Once I called on fire is when I lost control."

Kroseph looked around his room. "Why are we doing this in the inn, then? What if he loses control?"

"That's why we are doing this with water," Jackal said.

"We need to understand how to have Tibs channel essence without his personality changing."

“Tibs can make ice,” Kroseph pointed out, “and the weather is turning warmer. What if he decides that icing everything is how he’ll make everyone feel better?”

“Then I don’t think anywhere in the town’s safe,” Jackal replied. “He said his main reserve is basically bottomless, and it becomes whatever he’s channeling.”

“So maybe have him not channel through it?” Kroseph asked uncertainly.

“That isn’t how it works,” Carina said. “At least I don’t think it is. This isn’t something I’ve read about, but when I channel, I just do it, I don’t decide how, it just happens. Maybe if he had his bracers, he could do it. I need to think about pulling from my amulet, but we don’t have that.”

“Back to yourself, Tibs,” Jackal instructed.

“Why?” Tibs asked. “I can do much more good using my essence.”

Jackal ran a hand over his face. “I think we’re trying for too much. We sure just get him to let it go on command. That way, we can tell him to stop if he starts losing control like he did with fire.”

“He’ll be more helpful if he remains in control while using essence,” Carina countered.

“Sure, but it’s not like we have the time,” Jackal snapped. “I know you just got here, but we’re in the middle of a war.”

Kroseph stepped before the fighter. “Calm down. You know she isn’t dismissing what’s happened. It’s how she handles problems.”

Jackal looked at Kroseph and let out a breath. “I’d love to have some amazing weapon to throw at my father, but right now, Tibs’s a danger to the town.”

“He isn’t a weapon,” Carina snapped, stepping up and stopping at Kroseph’s hand on her chest. “He’s our friend, and he needs our help.”

Tibs was at a loss as to how to help calm them. They weren’t listening to each other. Would they listen to him?

“Hey Tibs,” Kroseph said, crouching before him and pulling his attention away from the mounting argument. “They’re just scared. That’s why they’re snapping at each other. They’ll get over it.”

Tibs nodded, but he bit his lower lip. He needed to help them reach that point now, not later.

“Tell me,” Kroseph said, drawing his attention to him again. “Why do you think you need your essence to help?”

“Because with it, I can soothe the pain away.” Tibs touched Kroseph’s temple with a finger and let essence flow over him.

His friend smiled. “I appreciate the effort, but you might need more training to do anything more than get me wet.”

“I’m sorry,” Tibs whispered. “I have all of this essence, and I keep forgetting all I’ve learned to do with it is commit violence. Why would I do that?”

“That’s not true.” Kroseph took Tibs’s hand in his. “You’ve used water to put out the fire. You’ve used your very own essence to heal your teammates. You’ve always used the best tool to help the rest of us.”

“It’s the only way I have to help now.”

Kroseph smiled. “The most helpful thing you ever did, you did without using an element. You convinced Don, a man you really don’t like, to speak to Harry. You avoided a lot of death and violence that way, without using an element. You talked the merchants into accepting your help against Jackal’s father. You kept the Runners from thinking only about themselves. You got them to work together, to tell each other how to survive the dungeon, even if the guild forbids that.” He smiled. “You’ve talked sense through the thick thing my man likes to call his head.”

He squeezed Tibs’s hands. “Your elements, they’re important, but they aren’t why you’re strong. You were that be for you got your first audience. You need to remember that the only thing your elements do is make you stronger. Not that you are weak without them.”

Tibs nodded slowly. “Thank you.”

“Now, please let go of water.”

Tibs did so, and his perception of the people in the room shifted. He hugged Kroseph tightly, taking him by surprise. “I’m glad you’re okay,” Tibs whispered, his eyes getting wet.

Kroseph chuckled and hugged him back. “I’m glad too, but this is about helping you.”

“You did.” Tibs let go. “But I don’t know how easy it’s going to be with the other elements. I couldn’t think when I used fire, just act. With Earth, I was so comfortable I didn’t worry about anything. I knew, I was certain that all I had to do was take my time, and I’d find the solution to any problem.”

Tibs thought back to how he’d felt when he’d used each of the elements in the courtyard. “Not of them was the right way to do it. I can’t protect anyone if all I want to do is help everyone. I can’t keep people safe if I don’t think about what I’ll do, but I can’t just think about what I can do either.”

Jackal squeezed Kroseph’s shoulder. “Seems like each element represents only a part of who we are, but individually, they aren’t enough. Just like one element isn’t enough to make anything real, like that bed, chair, or a tankard of ale.”

“That’s not right,” Carina said. “They don’t represent us, they existed before we—”

“I don’t think now’s the time for a lesson,” Tibs said.

“I’d think you’d be curious about what we know of the elements.” She smiled. “You usually don’t seem to care what else we should be doing.”

“I’m usually not at war,” he replied. “We need to focus on saving the town; then you can tell me about why I think differently when I’m using an element.” He took Kroseph’s hands in his. “And saving the time means I need to learn how to switch between the elements at *my* will.”

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Tibs roared in anger as he unleashed fire on the thugs trying to escape.

“Tibs, stop!” Jackal ordered.

Over the last eight days, Tibs had had no success in deciding to stop calling on an element. The inside of two unused warehouses attested to the damage fire could cause. It was the most volatile of the elements he had, so the one he’d worked harder getting to let go.

Tibs let Fire go.

While he hadn't managed to exert his will over the elements, they had reached a point where, even under one of their influence, he listened to an order to stop.

"I'm calling on water," he told the fighter and didn't wait for an acknowledgment. He didn't have the time. He chastised himself for always reverting to violence as he spread the water over the fires he had started, extinguishing them. This was the last time, he told himself. He would never call on Fire again, or any of the other elements. His role was to soothe and comfort, and he could only do that by wielding water.

"Let it go, Tibs."

He looked into Jackal's stern face and opened his mouth to explain why he couldn't.

"I said to let it go, Tibs."

Reluctantly, he did.

"You okay?" his friend asked, searching his eyes.

"Just strange how Water's the hardest one to let go of. With how out-of-control Fire makes me, you'd think that would be the hardest one." It was knowing there was so much sorrow out there, Tibs thought, that made Water so stubborn.

The other elements had proved easier to let go of, although he avoided Earth whenever possible because of how slowly he thought. He had no problem letting it go, but the time it took between hearing Jackal's order and doing it meant he wasn't helping for much longer.

The one element he didn't use, under any circumstances, was corruption. When they had tried it, Tibs had nearly talked Jackal into going out with him so they could melt Sebastian's face off.

Eight days of training as often as he could with letting go and it was the first time Jackal had been confident enough for the two of them to go out. On patrol, he told the others, then had to reassure them he'd make sure Tibs was safe. What Tibs would do, was talk to Sto. Find out if he could open his door so the others could be recalled.

Unfortunately, this was the fourth group of Sebastian's people they'd run into.

"You know," Jackal said as he searched one of the burned corpses, "the one downside of Fire is that you don't often leave loot for me to get."

"If you want, I'll let Water soothe the next group into not running away if you think that'll get you more loot."

Water and fire were the two Tibs had used the most. Air was too playful, Earth too slow, and of the rest, he didn't know enough about how to use them to do anything useful, even with all the essence at his disposal.

"I'll settle for less loot if it means my father doesn't find out what you can do."

"He's still going to want me dead."

"If he finds out what you can do, he isn't going to want you dead anymore. He'd going to want you collared like an animal."

Tibs sensed around them, pushing away the image that brought up. Instead of a clear way, or another patrol, he sensed a group in a house.

"There's a family huddled together in that house."

“Do you think they’ll be safe until we come back?”

Tibs glared at the fighter.

“Getting more Runners here will help more people, Tibs. And we need the dungeon to be open for that.”

“We don’t know if Sto’s even ready. They are in danger now.”

“Let’s be careful,” Jackal said. “We’ve had instances where my father’s people acted like scared townsfolk to lure us in.”

Tibs picked up the short sword he’d taken after their first encounter. He wasn’t good with it, but it had better reach than a knife. The pommel was singed more now, the leather was starting to peel off. He never let go of it quickly enough when he called on fire.

He cautiously walked around the house, peering through the windows at the empty rooms. They’d hidden in a small room, probably at the sounds of the fighting, one that only had one door Tibs could see.

He sensed five people, two who were small, so Tibs didn’t think these were Sebastian’s people, but as Jackal had said, they could be sneaky.

The two doors were locked, and the ground-floor windows latched. Tibs didn’t have tools, and couldn’t use water. Another reason to head for the rooming house soon. He stopped Jackal from kicking in the door by pointing at the open window on the first floor. The fighter nodded, then threw Tibs in.

Once Tibs got over the surprise, and up from the floor, he stepped to the window and glared down at the grinning fighter. Once he had control of his elements again, Jackal was going to pay.

The fighter made a shooing motion and Tibs moved away from the window.

He was going to burn all the took Jackal had even found.

Down the stairs, he opened the door and looked in. The five were at the back, the man and woman pulling the two small children to themselves tighter while the older one stood to interpose himself. He looked scared, but determined.

The pantry’s shelves were nearly empty, and they looked like he’d felt partway through Vål.

“Are any of you hurt?” he asked. His element was the one that didn’t cause him to act differently. And since he could use it without anyone noticing, so long as he didn’t wrap it over broken limbs, he figured it was the one thing he could still do to actively help.

“I’m Tibs,” he said when they didn’t reply or move. “I’m a Runner. I’m with the town. Jackal’s waiting outside. We’ll take you somewhere safe.”

That got them moving, but hesitatingly so.

He didn’t want to think what else they’d had to do to survive this long. Why they were the only ones he could sense in any of the houses.

As he led them out of the house, Tibs couldn’t shake the feeling this part of the town was now very much like his Street had been.

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Tibs looked around at the broken crates spilling pots and broken furniture. He would never have guessed that having so much fun would result in this much chaos. Kroseph was in

Jackal's arms, with Carina next to them, against the wall. There was a line of debris before them, marking where she'd been able to keep anything from hitting them, but they looked scared.

"Sorry," Tibs said, face burning.

This had been a celebration, in part. Not of finally getting to let go of the element when he wanted to. That had happened four days ago, but of retrieving his bracers and air knives.

It had started as a test of him pulling essence from the bracer, hoping would let him use the elements and not have his personality affected. He's picked air because he'd felt playful and he had his knives.

It had felt so good to not worry about anything and just enjoy himself. Of course, that meant he hadn't worried about the damage he'd caused. This wasn't quite as much as while he'd worked with fire, but only because Air couldn't spread the damage to other buildings.

"Are you sure the owner doesn't mind us using his warehouse to practice?" Kroseph asked worriedly.

"Don't worry," Jackal said casually. "We've cleared it. It's fine."

His man narrowed his eyes at the fighter. "Do you even know who owns this warehouse?"

Jackal shrugged. "Not your family. I know that for sure."

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"The information's right," Jabba said. "Something's happening. There's a dozen archers on the rooftops watching around the platform."

"Where does your father keep getting them?" Carina asked. "Just in the last six days, you and Tibs have to have taken out two dozen of them."

Jackal shrugged. "Archers are easy for my father to get. The king's always training some, but he doesn't pay all that much. A handful of silver will get my father a regiment of them."

"But we haven't seen anyone arrive in a week, right?" she looked around at the others. Tibs nodded, as did the rogues who spied on the platform.

"Knowing my father, if he didn't bring hundreds of them with his first group, he had them trickle in way before that. Even if he knew the guild wasn't going to be a problem, the town's full of Runners. He knew he'd need a lot of people to deal with, even only a few of us.

Tibs frowned. "But how didn't Harry notice? That's a lot of people with a lot of weapons."

"Weapons can be brought in crates marked as something else," Quigly said. "They might even have come in via one of the caravans."

"How Knuckles missed this is something that's going to have to wait until he gets his ass out of that building."

"He should be out already," Tibs said, more to himself. "He should be keeping the town safe." He'd sneaked out in the night to try to get to Harry and ask him why, but he hadn't made it. The guild must have something to let them know when someone approached

because as soon as he stepped onto the street opposite the building, he felt Adventurers manipulating essence and had retreated.

“Tibs,” Carina said, “Harry’s job isn’t protecting the town. It’s maintaining order.”

“But—” Tibs started among the derision the older Runners let out.

“Nope,” Jackal said. “It’s not even that. I told you, us Wells only do two things, we give orders or we obey them, and it’s the rare Wells who gives them. He does what the Guild tells him. And as we know, they aren’t going to get off their asses unless the dungeon is under threat. Speaking of which?”

“The door is still closed.” Tibs went to Sto every night, but the dungeon had yet to acknowledge his presence.

“Look,” Jabba said. “Do we really have the time for questions and discussion? We need to get ready for whatever is about to happen.”

“I’m a kid,” Tibs replied, grinning at her. “Asking questions is how I learn stuff.”

“Don’t,” Jackal warned her. “And we’re waiting on more information. As far as we know, it isn’t happening today, so there’s no need to rush.”

She looked around. “As anyone considered that maybe he’s holding us back because he wants his father to take over?”

Jackal burst out laughing. “Jabba, Jabba, Jabba. I know no one’s keeping track, and that is a shame, but I am willing to be a silver that I’ve killed more of my father’s people and anyone here. Not to say of those I killed trying to escape him before I landed in this town. The only reason I will see my father out of here alive is because I know his death will cause us more trouble than he’s already causing. I will die before I side with him.”

Tibs glared at the fighter. “Those archers,” He asked Jabba, “where are they?” he’d keep them busy with that, while they waited for Serba to send them more information.